Moscow State University

Faculty of Foreign Languages  
and Area Studies

# Department of Linguistics and Information Technologies

Ekaterina Dulina

English National Character vs. Russian National Character: Stereotypes

The World of Britain

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**Introduction**

First of all, to discuss the stereotypes about British and Russian national character we should define what we are talking about.

What is national character?

The term “national character” is used to describe “the enduring personality characteristics and unique life styles found among the populations of particular national states”.[[1]](#footnote-1)  In other words, it refers to the different sustainable features that characterize the majority of members of a particular national community, and includes: spiritual values, ideas, interests, religion, morality, motives, mental makeup, aspirations, feelings.

What is a stereotype?

A stereotype can be defined as “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing”[[2]](#footnote-2). It can also be described as “a conventional or hackneyed expression, custom, or mode of thought”[[3]](#footnote-3).

Stereotyping helps people categorize and understand their world, but at the same time it often leads to errors. Stereotypes can reduce a wide range of differences in people to simplistic categorizations, transform assumptions about particular groups of people into “realities”.

Stereotypes are not actually based on person’s own experience or knowledge but acquired secondhand.

Controversies over national stereotypes

To some, national stereotypes are just inaccurate preconceived notions, which can be pretty offensive to many people. To others, national stereotypes are harmless jokes based on the identity that a certain nation or people has established or projected towards other countries through the years.

But is there any of truth in them?

Of course, we have all been brought up to believe that stereotyping people is wrong. Still, it’s difficult to imagine Italian who is inarticulate, emotionally frigid and disciplined or over-emotional German who doesn’t respect laws. There is no doubt that we can imagine them. But in doing it, we go against our expectations where people of those nationalities are concerned. The expectations may be based on fictions – films, novels, and other cultural products. But they still have some connection with actual experience and must contain some element of truth. They give very superficial representation of culture and obviously are not totally reliable. However, few of us could claim to be absolutely immune to them.

It appears that stereotypes can range from those that are absolutely inaccurate to those that have some basis in reality.

In any case, it is useful to know widespread stereotypes, as they are part of the culture of those who are stereotyped, and of those who recognize and utilize them.

# Stereotypes about English national character

# What makes an Englishman?

What kind of people are the English? What characteristic traits and behavior distinguish them from other people?

Englishmen have reputation for being polite, proper, sophisticated, talking endlessly about the weather, apologising profusely regardless of where the fault lies, having a talent for standing patiently in queues, as well as a genuine sense of fair-play.

They are also known for their individualism, hobbies, fondness for understatement, stoicism, unspoken rules, non-interference in others’ affairs, common sense, ability to combine a stiff upper lip with sense of humour, self-restraint with eccentricity, traditions and conservatism with enterprise and business-orientation.

The negative end of this picture portrays them as being snobbish, xenophobic, prudent, pompous, unemotional, bombastic, self-important, apathetic, and obsessed with class and social status.

Let’s look at some of the most common cultural English stereotypes.

English stereotypes

**Stiff upper lip**

This phrase comes from the idea that an emotional or upset person has a quivering upper lip, so a stiff upper lip refers to the concept that the English are quite reserved, keep their feelings to themselves and remain resolute and calm in the face of adversity. 

It used to be regarded as a national trait that set the English apart from more emotional nationalities.

Whilst the times are changing and this is becoming less and less true, compared to other cultures around the world, Brits are still quite closed off emotionally and it really takes a lot of time, trust and hard work to be able to break down those walls.

## Impeccable manners

The Englishmen are so famous for their politeness that the stereotype of the English gentleman is known everywhere and most languages use the English word to refer to this way of being and behaving.

Many foreigners have commented on a remarkable politeness of the English people.

Today, some customs such as the custom of men deferring to women is somewhat on the wane, thanks to the strenuous efforts of the apostles of political correctness who see it more as condescension than consideration. An Englishmen will, however, probably still get away with opening a door or giving up a seat for all but the most strident of feminists.

**Talking about the weather**

## The weather is still Britain's favourite topic of conversation.

In some situations, weather talk is an icebreaker. In others it’s used to fill awkward silences, or divert the conversation away from uncomfortable topics. There are certain unwritten rules that the British follow when conducting these weather-related conversations. Firstly, the topic will almost always be introduced as a form of question, even if only in the intonation (e.g., “Raining again?”). Secondly, the person answering must agree. Failing to agree is quite a serious breach of etiquette. If someone says: ‘Cold, isn’t it?’ and you say: ‘Well actually, no,’ the person would be a bit taken aback, and feel that that was a discourteous thing to say.

### Understatements

The British are believed to be masters of the understatement. If they’re excited about something they sometimes enthuse “that’s nice” and, on the rare occasion when they’re deliriously happy, they’ve been known to exclaim “I say, that’s rather good”. On the other hand, if something disastrous happens (such as their house burns down) it might be termed “a spot of bother”.

## Apologising

The British have a need to apologise for absolutely any situation, saying ‘Sorry, I don’t smoke’ when asked for a lighter being a classic example. There are also so many different uses for the word ‘sorry’ in the U.K that apart from the obvious meaning of ‘I apologise’, sorry can also refer to “Hello”, “I didn’t hear you”, “I heard you but I’m annoyed at what you said”, or “You’re in my way”.

**Non-stop British humour**

Perhaps the most confusing part of British humour is that there is no ‘off’ switch. Almost every conversation between Brits is bound to feature some form of irony, sarcasm, banter, understatement, self-deprecation, teasing or mockery.

When every word exchanged between Brits has an undercurrent of humour, it becomes difficult to decipher when a Briton is joking or being serious. This is even more problematic considering the delivery of jokes is almost always done with a deadpan face.

**  Queuing**

The English said to be the best queuers in the world.

Whether you turn up at a railway station, a supermarket, or a post office, you’re sure to spot an orderly queue.

They have it nailed down to a respectable art form and few things offend Brits more than seeing someone jump the queue they’re standing in.

## Tea-drinking

Some people say Britain is a nation of tea drinkers.

A cup of tea is a vital part of everyday life for the majority of people in modern Britain. In many workplaces it’s considered outrageous to get up and make yourself a cup of tea without offering a round to everyone within earreach.

Tea is drunk at almost any time (approaching 200 million cups a day), not just in the morning or ‘afternoon tea’. Many Britons drink tea in the same quantities as other Europeans drink mineral water or wine.

**Obsessed With Class**

Although traditional class boundaries have become more blurred over the years, most Britons do tend to identify with one of the main classes for better or for worse and though some claim that social mobility is greater now than it was for previous generations, evidence suggests that Britain remains divided along class lines.

## “British accent””

It’s a common misconception among many foreigners that the British all speak the same English. There are numerous accents and dialects, half of which are so thick that you could be forgiven for thinking that people are conversing in an ancient secret language.

**Sports**

The British seem to be sports mad, although most people confine their interest to watching or gambling rather than taking part. The English are famous for their sense of fair play and playing by the rules – cheating is considered very bad form. Football (soccer) is the UK’s national sport. Also, cricket is special because it combines competition with the British dream of rural life.

**Bad eating habits**

British food has a bad reputation and British eating habits are regularly lambasted by other nations, especially those nearby on the European continent. "You can't trust people whose cuisine is so bad," was French president Jacques Chirac's famous Gallic put-down in 2005.

There exists a popular joke that traditional British cuisine is the worst cuisine in the world. Indeed, classic British dishes are not too [dainty](http://tooday.ru/?l=eng&r=13&t=traditional_british_cuisine-traditsionnaya_britanskaya_kuhnya-bb#3273), but they are nourishing, natural and tasty. Much attention is paid to the food quality. Residents of Great Britain prefer local food to imported products, so, nearly all fish, milk and meat products are produced within the country, and vegetables are grown by local farmers.

**Drinking problems**

A common stereotype of Britain is that it’s a nation of drunkards. Some people believe that the only Brits who aren’t permanently drunk on weekends are on-duty policemen and airline pilots; no Saturday night in Britain is complete without hospitalisation; liver transplants are routine procedures.

Contrary to popular belief, the British aren’t all drunks and are languishing in a fairly lowly 12th position in the alcohol consumption league among the world’s top 30 developed countries.

**Ignorance of other cultures**

The British may be stereotyped as ignorant of all countries and cultures beyond their own.

There is an opinion that Britons genuinely don’t want to know about other cultures because they're already bored of them. They live in a cosmopolitan, mass-immigrated singularity of foreigners, and you could be from Saturn and most Brits would just file you as "sort of South Asian" in their mental taxonomy.

However, it should be noted, that average Englishmen are no more ignorant about the rest of the world than average people of virtually any country*.*

# Stereotypes about russian national character

Who are Russians?

The immediate associations with Russia in the West are "cold", "snow", "winter" and all the attributes of the concept. The stereotype of Russia as a cold, snowy country is typical of both the past and current centuries. The attributes of winter are also associated with the Russian way of life: furs, fur coats, fur hats, big shawls, vodka, the excessive consumption of which is also justified by cold.

Talking about the main stereotypical characteristics of the Russian national character, here are the most frequently mentioned qualities: religiousness; sincerity and openness, often hidden behind outer reservedness, and, at the same time, extreme suspiciousness; sense of brotherhood; solidarity, lack of individualism; hospitality; generosity; patience; endurance; disingenuity; dodginess; inborn laziness; drunkenness; indifference to political freedoms; conservative thinking; fatalism; light mindedness; carelessness; capacity to give up everything for the sake of an idea or a passion, even if it does nothing but harm.

Russians  are often believed to be generous; inclined to self-analysis and self-criticism; deeply distrustful of happiness and eager to indulge every distressing thought and melancholy emotion; dishonest in commercial, political, and social life; either spies or communists; warmongering similar to Americans; violent, rude; strong and nearly-suicidally brave.

There are many stereotypes about Russia and the Russian people in the world. Let’s review some of them.

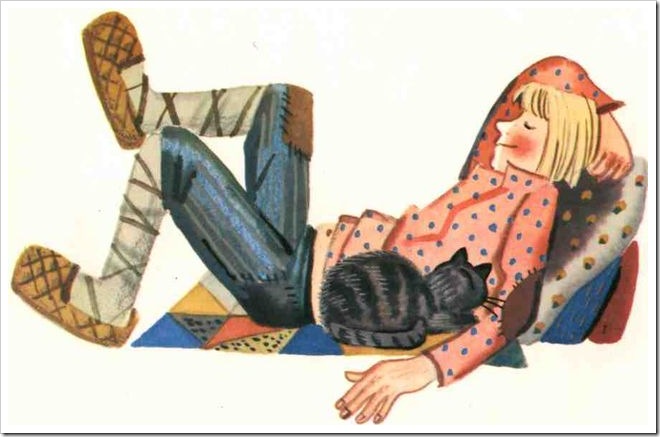
Russian stereotypes

**'Spacious soul'**

'Spacious soul' or 'big nature' - that will be the first thing to hear about the Russian national character. The phrase has become a commonplace, while its meaning is not so easy to define.   
 "Russian people are altogether spacious people, just like their land, and extremely inclined to the fantastic and disorderly", - a Dostoyevsky's character says in "Crime and Punishment".   
 Just picture the vast expanses of Russia stretching over the continent and uniting Europe and Asia, with a great variety of landscapes, nations and cultures and you will perceive its infinity reverberating in the unconscious collective mind of its people. Hence, the Russian generosity and spontaneity, weakness for extremes and longing for the unknown, as well as unpredictability and lack of order and certainty.

**Generosity**

The vastness of this land implies Russian full-handedness. Fond of making handsome gestures, Russians enjoy surprising their friends and guests with generous gifts and regales. Even if the hosts are having hard times, they will do their best to treat their guests well.   
 Pettiness and greediness are considered real sins in Russia.

**Laziness**

Russian laziness is almost as notorious as Russian 'spacious soul'. It is dreamy and meditative. Not that Russians welcome or severely criticize it - they rather take it as an elemental force, which can as well endow one with insights and original ideas. Yet, most of these great ideas are not realized for that very laziness. Russians will think ten times if something is worth their efforts, before they move a finger.   
In fact, Russians can be very hard-working; they are enthusiastic about their work if they are interested in it. In this case they can work all day round, without any intervals and days off.

**Alcoholism**

**** People from abroad think that in Russia almost everyone suffers from alcoholism. Some foreigners are sure that there must be vodka in every home and that people drink it every day.

Russian people are said to drink in order to be drunk. After they finish vodka they will become very sad and talk about the sorrowful story of their own. Sometimes they will burst into tears.

In fact, alcohol is present at almost every occasion in Russia; this is a matter of custom and tradition. Nonetheless, drinking habit is distributed unevenly among different social groups. It is widespread in countryside, in rural districts where there are lots of unemployed. It is less typical of people in cities   Besides, according to the reports of the World Health Organization, there are nations who outdo Russians in drinking. But not many, to tell the truth.

**Chain-smoking**

It has been said that smoking is the unofficial Russian national sport, also that in restaurants, there are two sections you can sit in: smoking and chain smoking. Although the Russian government is slowly starting to impose harsh anti-smoking regulations in an attempt to end the smoking epidemic gripping the country, Russia still has one of the highest smoking rates in the world.

### Stony-faced and mean

Russians are not prone to smile. They are gloomy, unsociable and unwelcoming.

If you take a look at Russian people on the streets, in the metro, or in the stores, you may well think that they never smile. The truth is, however, that Russians are warm, friendly, and extremely funny – just not in public. It is a norm in Russia to have one’s “serious face” on while in public places, and being too loud or showing too much emotion is considered strange and perhaps even impolite. Culturally, Russians don’t smile at strangers for the sake of being “polite” because they consider this gesture weird and a waste of time.

Russians don’t smile to be friendly. They smile when something is funny.

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### Superstitious

Russians are rather superstitious people with century old customs and habits: for example, don’t reach out your hand to greet your hosts as soon as the door opens across the threshold, first step in; don’t whistle as that might mean there are will be money problems in the house. One should keep in mind that Monday is inauspicious for launching a new undertaking, and black cat crossing one’s path is a bad omen.

Russians are mystical and superstitious people at heart. The roots of these superstitions seem to lie in countryside, like the Russian fondness for proverbs or their belief in folk remedies.

### Beautiful women

### Many Russian women extremely determined to affirm their femininity, to be and appear like women regardless of their income and personal situation.

They seem to make something of a mission of a valuing their femininity with a dress code and careful makeup.

### “ All Russians are still Communists”

Russians are different. To be fair, there are still a lot of Communists in Russia. However, with variety of Russian political parties and a non-Communist party in power, it should be evident that not all Russians are communists.

**Russians are rude**

They don't intend to be. However, many of them are not born-diplomats at all. They are more direct and will say what they feel.  If they do not like your idea, they will rather say it is stupid, than (like the British people) – that it is “interesting”.

**Collectivism**Actually, Russians are very individualistic people. A typical Russian cares only about himself and his closest family. Society is extremely atomized. Russians have no network of grassroots local community organization like the British.

Most of the Russians who live with their parents or other relatives, do it out of necessity (can't afford renting or buying property), not by choice.



**There are bears everywhere**

Unless you’re living in the middle of nowhere, the only bear you might see roaming the street is the current prime minister, whose surname comes from the Russian word for bear. Sure, there are bears in circuses and the in the zoo, but by and large, it is safe to declare big cities bear-free.

**Conclusion**

Britain and Russia are beautiful countries with multi-faceted and ever-developing cultures. Like the English, Russians are immensely fortunate in being born to one of the world’s great languages, which is endlessly rich and subtle in what it can express. Both nations use their languages ironically and allusively all the time. Russians drink as much tea as Englishmen. They also love their gardens and football. Both countries harbour a lamentable distrust of foreigners. The British are obsessed with the abstract idea of Britishness, Russians believe they have the “Russian idea”, special destiny and vocation unlike any other.

Many people think they know what kind of person the typical Englishman is. Same for the average Russian. However, there is much more variation among individuals within any one culture than there is between different nations.

It doesn’t mean that nations are not culturally different. In fact, Russian and English cultures differ very much: our history, land, religion, social structures, economy bear little resemblance to British model, institutions and land.

Despite the abundance of the information in our so-called "information age”, both countries have many stereotypes about each other. Some of them may be partly true, some may be verging on the edge of truth, some may be ridiculous, and some are false. Many Russians know the English from the works of Sir Conan Doyle and might expect them to drink tea at 5 o'clock and live in constant foggy and rainy weather. At the same time, Britons generally know Russians as half-drunk gangsters from American movies or as people in complicated emotional situation from Dostoyevsky’s novels.

We tend to stereotype because it helps us make sense out of a highly confusing world. Stereotypes classify the infinite variety of human beings into a convenient handful of types towards whom we learn to act in a stereotyped fashion. They save us the «trouble» of finding out what the world is like - they give it its accustomed look. The trouble is that stereotypes make us mentally lazy and give us over-generalized, over-simplified, if not false, impression about other cultures. They are a kind of a gossip about the world, a gossip that makes us prejudge people before we ever lay eyes on them.

Perhaps, it’s about time that we stop perpetrating unfounded myths about other people and accept that mankind is a mixture of unique individuals with different ways of living life. Maybe, the best policy is to assume you know nothing about the personality traits of national groups, and judge each individual personally.

As Dorothy L. Sayers put it, “We are much too much inclined in these days to divide people into permanent categories, forgetting that a category only exists for its special purpose and must be forgotten as soon as that purpose is served.”

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